Synopsis

Ph. D. English

Mapping Gender and Violence: Assault, Abuse and Trauma in Select Plays of Indian Women Writers

By

Isai Arasi T.

19PHENF009

Supervisor

Dr. S. Christina Rebecca

Department of English

Submitted to

Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women,

Coimbatore - 641043.

January - 2025

Mapping Gender and Violence: Assault, Abuse and Trauma in Select Plays of Indian Women Writers

Drama represents a significant form of artistic expression that not only entertains but also educates audiences and fosters social transformation. It occupies a crucial role across diverse cultures, characterized by its capacity to engage the senses and elicit profound emotional responses. Women playwrights harness the power of drama to raise awareness, confront social inequalities, and articulate their perspectives, thereby empowering themselves to address grievances and illuminate acts of dehumanization.

The domain of theatre has historically been predominantly governed by male practitioners, often at the expense of female participation. Theatre has functioned as a discriminatory sphere grounded in gender, allowing only women classified as 'public' figures, such as courtesans and prostitutes, to engage in performances. Male practitioners have typically been responsible for assigning roles to female characters, thus constructing, and defining them while disregarding a woman-cantered perspective. However, the emergence of female practitioners has disrupted the conventional discourse of theatre, giving rise to a new form of performance that embraces feminist principles. This theatre, known as Street Preksha in ancient India, is now recognized as Feminist Theatre.

Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta, and Manjula Padmanabhan are distinguished Indian playwrights who have made substantial contributions to social transformation through their theatrical works. These women playwrights have garnered significant attention in print media, with their artistic development thoroughly documented. Their plays have been published in anthologies such as *Women Centre Stage* and *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival*, further solidifying their impact on the dramatic landscape. Their works challenge social taboos surrounding women's desires, sexuality, and sensitive issues such as rape and

domestic violence. These plays are regarded as forms of resistance against the inequalities and injustices faced by women in society. Another prominent playwright, Anupama Chandrasekhar, from a younger generation, highlights the detrimental effects of technology on youth, emphasizing misuse and potential harm. The theatrical works of Anupama Chandrasekhar have been showcased in various countries, including India, Europe, Canada, and the United States.

With their multifaceted personalities and numerous prestigious awards, these playwrights have undoubtedly added an intriguing dimension to Indian drama. They possess a remarkable ability to weave captivating narratives, utilizing drama as a powerful medium to convey non-verbal emotions and depict the intricate ebb and flow of human experiences. Through their works, these playwrights demonstrate their enlightened perspectives and rationality, showcasing a profound understanding of the contemporary world. Their artistic vision and innovative storytelling techniques position them at the forefront of dramatic development in India.

Need for the Study:

The research is essential for raising awareness and sensitising both society and individuals to the importance of gender equality, thereby contributing to the prevention of violence against women. It highlights the critical need for systemic change to ensure women's safety.

Primary Texts:

Dina Mehta – *Getting Away with Murder* (2000)

Poile Sengupta – *Mangalam* (1993)

Manjula Padmanabhan – *Lights Out* (1986)

Anupama Chandrasekhar – *Free Outgoing* (2007)

- The plays are organised according to the chapters, highlighting the various types of violence women experience from childhood to adulthood in private, public, and digital realms.

Research Gap:

Through a comprehensive review of existing research articles and theses, it is evident that the selected plays by female playwrights predominantly explore themes such as narrative techniques, sexual assault against women in the public sphere, and the socio-political dimensions associated with the creation of gendered spaces. Furthermore, these works investigate how playwrights employ theatre as a medium to challenge patriarchal systems. Although some studies have addressed the causes of violence against women, there is a noticeable absence of exploration into the repercussions of such violence on women's mental and emotional well-being. This research endeavours to address this gap by focusing not only on the causes of violence against women but also on its profound impact on the psyche of women.

Research Methodology:

This research is qualitative in nature and interprets and analyses a selection of literary works, namely Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam*, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder*, and Anupama Chandrasekhar's *Free Outgoing*. The qualitative framework employed in this research involves gathering data and information from non-numerical sources such as biographies, case studies, and literary texts.

Documentation and Citation:

The researcher has adhered to the 9th edition of the MLA Style.

Chapter II – Gender and Trauma: Theoretical Framework

The research investigates the role of power and gender inequality as the primary factors contributing to the widespread prevalence of violence in society. Gender is not an inherent characteristic, but rather a social construct perpetuated by "patriarchal appropriation" in order to oppress women (Cottais). Lori L. Heise in his article entitled "Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework," states that "adherence to rigid gender roles—either at the societal or the individual level—increases the likelihood of violence against women" (279). Gender norms serve as an obstacle for women in their pursuit of a fulfilling life. This disparity creates a divide between men and women, ultimately enabling men to maintain positions of power within society. As a result of this power differential, men subject women to mistreatment, devaluing their emotions and exploiting their bodies. To comprehend the roots of this violence, it's essential to explore theories that shed light on the underlying mechanisms. One such theory that provides valuable insights is the Objectification Theory.

Objectification theory was first proposed by psychologists Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts in 1997. It asserts that the societal objectification of women plays a significant role in their dehumanization and subsequent mistreatment. According to this theory, women are frequently reduced to mere objects, primarily valued for their physical appearance and sexual desirability rather than for their intellectual capabilities, emotions, or inherent worth as individuals. They delve into the idea that bodies are not inherently objectified, but rather "constructed through sociocultural practices and discourses," which in turn lay the groundwork for the sexual objectification of women (174). The study incorporates trauma theory to explore the psychological state of the victims. Trauma, which is defined as a substantial event that surpasses the ordinary coping mechanisms of individuals, frequently involves threats to one's life or physical well-being, or personal encounters with

violence and mortality. To examine the psyche of victims in relation to the traumatic events, the researcher has utilized the theoretical works of Judith Herman, specifically *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, as well as Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative*, and *History and Trauma: Explorations in Memory*.

Structure of the Thesis:

Chapter I – Introduction

Chapter II – Gender and Trauma: Theoretical Framework

Chapter III – Divested of Innocence: Child Sexual Abuse and Trauma in Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder*

Chapter IV – Trauma Behind Closed Doors: Domestic Violence in Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam*

Chapter V – Grim Realities: Rape Culture and Apathy in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

Chapter VI – Cyber Violence: Sexual Harassment, Cyberscape and Trauma in Anupama Chandrasekhar's *Free Outgoing*

Chapter VII - Conclusion

The research investigates interpersonal violence which includes child sexual abuse, domestic violence, rape, and revenge pornography. These four offenses were selected based on their common characteristics, such as power dynamics, coercion, violation of women's rights, and sexual assault. The study examines women's experiences from childhood to adulthood, the challenges they encounter in both public and private spheres, and the implications of digital violence. Additionally, the research explores the coping mechanisms employed by victims and their social circles in response to such trauma.

Chapter III – Divested of Innocence: Child Sexual Abuse and Trauma in Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder*

Child sexual abuse constitutes a significant form of exploitation, wherein a perpetrator engages a child or minor through sexual desire or coercive threats, subsequently compelling or manipulating the child to partake in sexual activities. Numerous individuals exploit their power to dominate and oppress those who are more vulnerable or lack agency. From a radical feminist perspective, the sexual abuse of children is not solely a manifestation of sexual desire but also a demonstration of power dynamics (Solomon, 1992).

The risk factor of sexual abuse of girl children is higher than that of boys. Finkelhor posits that the prevalence of child sexual abuse is directly correlated with the socialization of men. A critical contributing factor to child sexual abuse is gender discrimination. Warner asserts that "child sexual abuse represents a key site in which unequal and gendered power relations are played out" (qtd. in Herman-Davis, 9). Furthermore, she elucidates a connection between adult rape and child sexual abuse, highlighting the oppressive characteristics of a patriarchal society: "rape of some women and girls by some men served all men by keeping all women and girls fearful and subordinate" (qtd. in Herman-Davis, 9). In the chosen text, Sonali the protagonist emerges as a victim of child sexual abuse, having been sexually assaulted by her uncle.

Child victims often require considerable time to comprehend the nature of their experiences. They necessitate advocacy and support to foster hope and facilitate healing. The absence of guidance may compel them to internalize their trauma. The impact of child sexual abuse significantly influences their daily lives, and they often struggle to establish and maintain intimate and trusting relationships. The reluctance to disclose experiences of sexual abuse to family members, relatives, and friends fosters a sense of isolation and hinders access

to supportive resources. For Sonali, the trauma of her past impedes her ability to lead a normal life. Victims often suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as a result of which they feel "disconnected from the present" and react to life experiences as if they were "anticipating, experiencing, or responding to earlier trauma" (qtd. in Chakraborty, 5). The trauma haunts them even in their "dreams" (Caruth 5), disrupting their sleep and peaceful nights. Sleep disturbances and nightmares are direct consequences of trauma. Nightmares transport them to a horrific realm that is considerably worse than the real world, reminding them of the past that they wish to forget. Judith Herman asserts that recovery begins within the family context rather than in isolation. In this narrative, Sonali gradually overcomes her trauma with the support of her husband.

Chapter IV – Trauma Behind Closed Doors: Domestic Violence in Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam*

Domestic violence is defined as "any behaviour the purpose of which is to gain power and control over a spouse, partner, girlfriend/boyfriend, or intimate family member" (qtd. in Hazarika 287). Within familial structures, men are often considered a "privileged group" (Connell 84) and utilize violence to maintain their dominance, particularly within the institution of marriage, to control and subjugate women. The constructs of gender and masculinity significantly contribute to interpersonal violence. Domestic violence manifests in various forms, including physical, sexual, and emotional or psychological abuse. A man's failure to meet societal expectations of masculinity can lead to low self-esteem and other detrimental psychological effects, a phenomenon Pleck describes as "gender role discrepancy" (6). This perceived inadequacy threatens his standards of masculinity, prompting him to employ aggression and force to regain and restore his position. Pleck refers to this restoration of masculinity using force against individuals perceived as non-masculine

or feminine as a "reclamation model" (Fleming et al. 252). In this context, the character Dorai exhibits aggressive behaviour towards his wife, engaging in acts of physical violence and humiliation in front of others. He objectifies her body night after night.

Marital rape is often not recognized as a form of sexual violence by society, as it is normalized within an androcentric framework that views the wife as legally the "husband's sexual property" (Yllö prologue 1). In such a paradigm, women's bodies are reduced to mere sexual objects, utilized to satisfy men's desires. By dismissing women's emotions and exploiting their bodies, men undermine their confidence and erode their sense of self-worth. Men frequently fail to recognize how their actions inflict psychological harm on women. The emotional, sexual, and physical abuse of women has a direct and detrimental impact on their psychological well-being. This assault hinders their daily functioning, leading them to believe that remaining silent, submissive, and isolated will protect them from further violence and blame. Consequently, this situation fosters a sense of alienation from the outside world, resulting in emptiness and a lack of fulfilment.

As a result of chronic abuse, victims often experience constriction, which is one of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They may feel emotionally numb, and their state of consciousness may "freeze" (Herman 42). This emotional and psychological numbing response leads to a loss of trust and triggers an existential crisis. In this narrative, the character Mangalam endures abuse without resistance, isolating herself from the external world to evade further harm. Victims wrestle with feelings of shame, guilt, and low self-esteem, resulting in "pathological grief, disrupted relationships, and chronic depression" (Herman 55-56). Cathy Caruth observes that some victims engage in self-destructive behaviours, including suicide. In this case, Mangalam resorts to a negative coping mechanism by choosing to end her life. Had she possessed a support system or someone to understand her during her difficult times, her life might have taken a different, more positive trajectory.

Chapter V – Grim Realities: Rape Culture and Apathy in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

The abuse of women in the private sphere aims to uphold male power and control over their actions. This tactic is similarly applied in public contexts to reinforce male dominance and regulate women's conduct. Men primarily seek to dominate women and induce fear, thereby safeguarding their authority. Rape represents a severe threat to women and is the most atrocious form of sexual violence against them. Rape constitutes a grievous violation of women. In her work, What is Rape? Social Theory and Conceptual Analysis, Hilkje Charlotte Hänel argues that rape should be viewed as a social practice. Hänel supports her argument with two key points: firstly, rape is not merely an isolated event but a broader social issue; secondly, it is often perceived as an "accepted practice" (130). Rape transcends mere physical exploitation, involving a complex dynamic of coercion and male dominance. Susan Brownmiller argues that rape is a male prerogative and a tool for power, exacerbated when women resist. In *Lights Out*, the victim is objectified, allowing the offenders to assert control and reinforce their masculinity through sexual dominance.

Rape is inextricably linked to a pervasive culture that promotes and normalizes sexual violence against women. This culture, commonly referred to as rape culture, is characterized by a set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that perpetuate and condone sexual assault and harassment, and create an environment in which victims are often blamed, shamed, and disbelieved. In sexual assault, women are considered as sexual objects. Fredrickson and Roberts, in their article "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks," analyse how women are objectified in both explicit (such as sexual violence) and subtle (like the male gaze) ways. Playwright Manjula Padmanabhan exposes these forms of objectification in her play, emphasizing that the

sexualized gaze often leads to sexual objectification. In the play, *Lights Out* the rape victim is viewed as a mere sexual object by the offenders, who exploit her body. Meanwhile, Bhasker and Mohan, who witness the crime, derive pleasure from staring at her body, a behaviour termed as "ogle" and "leer" (176).

Rape not only entails physical exploitation but also serves as a warning to the female community, reinforcing the idea that women are mere objects of sexual desire. The emotional scars left behind are indelible, highlighting women's societal position. The playwright illuminates this phenomenon through the character of Leela, who serves as a witness to the act of rape rather than a victim. Despite not experiencing the full extent of trauma that a victim may endure, Leela still experiences a profound sense of "terror, rage, and despair," as Judith has termed it, "traumatic countertransference" or "vicarious traumatization" (140). Leela remains in a constant state of alertness, sensing the presence of danger. This state is referred to as hyperarousal, "which is the first cardinal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, the traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably, to small provocations, and sleeps poorly" (35). She undergoes dual trauma (Kennan), one from the rape event itself, which causes psychological and emotional harm, leading to symptoms such as a sense of vulnerability, fear, and helplessness. Her perceived failure to protect the victim engenders feelings of helplessness, which in turn leads to hypersensitivity. She also suffers from hallucinations, hearing the screams of victims even after the rape incident, and isolates herself from the outside world. The second trauma involves the invalidation of her testimony. Here, Leela's account is dismissed by her husband and his friends, intensifying her symptoms. The denial of Bhasker impedes Leela's healing process.

Chapter VI – Cyber Violence: Sexual Harassment, Cyberscape and Trauma in Anupama Chandrasekhar's *Free Outgoing*

The digital age has fundamentally transformed communication and societal interactions; however, it has concurrently facilitated the emergence of cybercrimes, particularly those that target women. Such offenses, which encompass cyber harassment, stalking, and online fraud, disproportionately affect women, posing significant threats to their safety and overall quality of life. Anupama Chandrasekhar has elucidated how the perpetration of cybercrime against women detrimentally impacts their development and future prospects, as depicted in the play *Free Outgoing*. In this work, a fifteen-year-old girl named Deepa endures considerable hardship due to the widespread distribution of a sexually explicit video involving her and her boyfriend, Jeevan. The playwright not only highlights the consequences faced by Deepa but also examines the social repercussions endured by her entire family, who become the subjects of community scrutiny and confrontations as a result of this incident.

Sexist beliefs, which encompass deeply ingrained and systemic attitudes and ideologies that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination based on sex, significantly contribute to the existence and prevalence of revenge pornography, which is defined as the "posting of nude or sexually explicit photographs or videos of people online without their consent, even if the photograph itself was taken with consent" (US National 14). This phenomenon often arises from the widespread practice of sexting. Beliefs in patriarchal systems and societal norms objectify women, reducing them to commodities for male consumption. This dynamic perpetuates revenge pornography, undermining women's autonomy and inflicting irreparable harm, constituting a manifestation of sex discrimination. In this context, Deepa experiences profound victim-blaming; despite providing her consent while recording the video, she becomes the target of blame from her community for the traumatic situation she faces.

Victims of revenge pornography often describe their ordeal as akin to being “virtually raped” (qtd. in Hall and Hearn 20). They often face long-term psychological, personal, and social disturbances due to the explicit content. Deepa's profound trauma has compromised her ability to express herself and interact, resulting in physical and mental health issues. Following the traumatic incident, Deepa's ability to freely express herself and engage with others has been severely compromised. The profound trauma she has endured continues to haunt her, resulting in both physical and mental health issues. In contrast to individuals with higher self-esteem, victims often possess low self-esteem and experience humiliation. This sense of humiliation disrupts their well-being and undermines their sense of dignity. Online victimization, such as revenge pornography, is associated with mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. It can precipitate PTSD, exacerbate depressive symptoms, heighten anxiety, and provoke suicidal ideation. Victims of revenge pornography exhibit elevated levels of psychological distress, comparable to those experienced by survivors of rape or child pornography. The only individual who stands by Deepa is her brother Sharan. Initially, he struggles to comprehend the situation and attributes the blame to Deepa. However, he ultimately recognizes that she is not at fault and endeavours to support her. Sharan is the sole individual who truly understands the complexities of Deepa's circumstances.

Chapter VII Conclusion:

India, a developing nation, is working to achieve developed status by protecting women from assaults. However, the frequency of crimes against women continues to rise due to the persistent influence of traditional gender norms. These norms perpetuate a power imbalance between men and women, leading to violence against women. Cultural transformation is crucial for eliminating violence against women, eradicating objectification, and subordination, and dismantling patriarchal ideologies through comprehensive education.

Legal measures can deter violence, but understanding moral wrongness is essential. Educating men to respect and treat women equally promotes a transformative shift in societal perceptions. This transformation will facilitate a gradual transition from an androcentric framework to one of gender equity.

Women who have experienced violence endure significant psychological trauma, which is often intensified by adverse reactions from society. The presence of social stigma, coupled with feelings of fear and betrayal, leads to their isolation. This isolation cultivates emotions of inferiority, hopelessness, and diminished self-worth, thereby obstructing their ability to engage in typical social interactions. Judith Herman identifies three essential processes for healing in women. The first process involves ensuring stabilization and safety. The second process allows individuals to acknowledge their pain through remembrance and mourning. The final process, reconnection, encompasses the rebuilding of trust in oneself and others. Throughout this healing journey, emotional support from family and relatives is paramount. Their understanding and encouragement are critical factors that facilitate women's emotional and psychological healing, empowering them to confront societal structures with renewed courage.

Scope for Further Studies

In future research, this study may be expanded to investigate the stigmatization of women in the selected plays. Moreover, it can focus on themes such as silence, communication, and family dynamics. Furthermore, it may explore women's struggles for autonomy and identity. Additionally, the research can analyse the relationship between socioeconomic status and the violence experienced by women in these plays.

Limitations

This study employs the concepts of objectification and trauma theory to enhance both the substantive content and analytical framework. It examines the various factors contributing to violence against women and investigates the profound impacts of such violence. However, the research intentionally omits an examination of the socioeconomic status of women and refrains from differentiating between urban and rural contexts, in order to maintain a focused analysis of the central themes.

Works Cited:

Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. United States, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

Chakraborty, Abin. "Abuse, Anxiety and After: Sexual Abuse of the Girl-Child in Dina Mehta's Getting Away with Murder and Mahesh Dattani's Thirty Days in September." *International Journal of The Frontiers of English Literature and The Patterns of ELT*, vol. 3, no. 1, Jan. 2015. www.engishjournal.mgit.ac.in.

Connell, R. *Masculinities.* University of California Press, 1995.

Cottais, Camille. "Radical Feminism." Translated by Caroline Feldner, *example.com*.

Fleming, Paul J., Sofia Gruskin, Florencia Rojo, and Shari L. Dworkin. "Men's Violence Against Women and Men Are Inter-Related: Recommendations for Simultaneous Intervention." *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 146, 2015, pp. 249-256.

Fredrickson, Barbara L., and Tomi-Ann Roberts." Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 21, 1997, pp. 173-206,

https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/FredricksonRoberts-ilovepdf-compressed1.pdf.

Hall, Matthew, and Jeff Hearn. *Revenge Pornography: Gender, Sexuality and Motivations*. Routledge, 2018.

Hänel, Hilkje Charlotte. *What is Rape? Social Theory and Conceptual Analysis*. Germany, transcript, 2018.

Hazarika, Breez Mohan. "Reading Domestic Violence in Girish Karnad's Play *Naga Mandala*." *Middle Flight*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 286-296.

Heise, Lori L. "Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework." *Violence Against women*, vol. 4, no. 3, July 1998, pp. 262-290.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence — From Domestical Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992.

Herman-Davis, Lisa. "Investigating Child Sexual Abuse: A Feminist Perspective." Wilkes Honors College of Florida Atlantic University. Thesis, May 2012.

Yllö, Kersti, and M. Gabriela. Torres. *Marital Rape: consent, Marriage and Social Change in the Global Context*. Oxford University Press. 2016.